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Fulbrightism

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There are two theories about why Sen. William Fulbright, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Grand Mogul of liberal foreign policy thinking, delivered his blast on "myths and realities" in American foreign policy. One is that he did it as a trial balloon, with at least the partial assent of the President and Administration. The other is that it is one more expression of the growing break between the Kennedy and Johnson factions in the Democratic Party.

My guess is that it is the second. But I don't rule out the possibility that it is a strange mixture of the two. There is little doubt that the Kennedy wing of the party is becoming increasingly estranged from the Johnson policies, especially the Tom Mann policy on Panama and the rest of Latin America, but also on Russia, France and China. It is hard to think of how Johnson could have stopped the spunky Fulbright, with his restless, probing mind, from having his say. But given that fact, Johnson may also have been quite willing to see how the nation reacts to what may come in time (if the Senator continues) to be called a policy of Fulbrightism.

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The basic theme of Fulbrightism is that American policy has become frozen in a struggle-to-the-death against world communism, and has missed three big facts of life that are part of the world of reality. One is that world communism has split, and the splits are more important for us than whatever unity is left. A second is that America's allies will not support rigid anti-Communist measures, especially the effort to freeze trade with Communist nations. The third is that Russia, China and even little Cuba are here to stay, and America may as well accommodate itself to that fact.

What Fulbright proposes accordingly is that we negotiate with Panama, try to get along with Cuba instead of trying fruitlessly to throttle it by a boycott, and welcome de Gaulle's break in the free world's treatment of China as a pariah. He also proposes that we treat the Soviet Union as a great power instead of as an implacable enemy.

If I understand Fulbright, he is saying, as Johnson said the other day, that the world is not what it was but what it is, and that America will miss many chances to strengthen its standing in an orderly world unless it moves even further from the cold war than it has already done. He is saying in effect that we must not underestimate the willingness of the Communist nations to cooperate with us for world peace, not out of any love for us but because realistically they too must survive.

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Unquestionably Fulbright needs political courage to say all this. As soon as he delivered his speech the Republican National Committee attacked it as Chamberlain-type appeasement, and a number of right-wing columnists took the cue, using practically the same language. The Fulbright polka may be ill-advised and may rest on a faulty analysis. But the appeasement parallel is poppycock. Chamberlain tried to appease Hitler because Nazi power was far greater than British, and Chamberlain foolishly thought he could buy Hitler off. But American and European power today is far greater than that of the Communist world. There is no need or intention to buy off Russia and China.

A policy may, however, be courageous and still be wrong-headed. How valid is Fulbrightism?

If Fulbright believes that the Communists have given up their grand design for world rule, as a hope and guide-line for their policy, I would call him wrong about it. But if he is saying that the dangers of nuclear overkill have made any nation's ambition for complete world power an unrealizable dream, then I agree. Conflict between nations can no longer be purely ideological in its base. Nor can conflicts any longer be resolved by resort to war measures which could escalate into nuclear annihilation. To that extent Fulbright's call for drastic re-thinking of our premises is valid.

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It is easier to call for re-thinking than to lay down valid policies. I think Fulbright is right on Cuba. But when he calls on us to give up our economic weapons, in the political struggle with Cuba, Russia and China, this is bound to mean the strengthening of the Communist camp. Such a result would be highly unwise unless there is strong evidence that the Russians have not only unfrozen the cold war but are also ready to give up the world political war—the struggle to defeat America and its allies by every means short of military. I am not convinced that this is yet true.

Which leads to my only other doubt. The same split between Russia and China that gives America a chance to change its policies also strips the Russians of any control of Chinese actions. The Russians may mean to become well-behaved and to give up their design for world power. But neither they nor Fulbright can answer for the Chinese.

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